

Social Studies

His Name Was AMERIGO



by Ellen B. Cutler

Who was Amerigo Vespucci and why was America named for him? In this book you will read about this Italian explorer and the challenges he faced on the seas.

Vocabulary

astronomy

maritime

expedition

embark

latitude

longitude

astrolabe

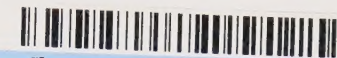
cartographer

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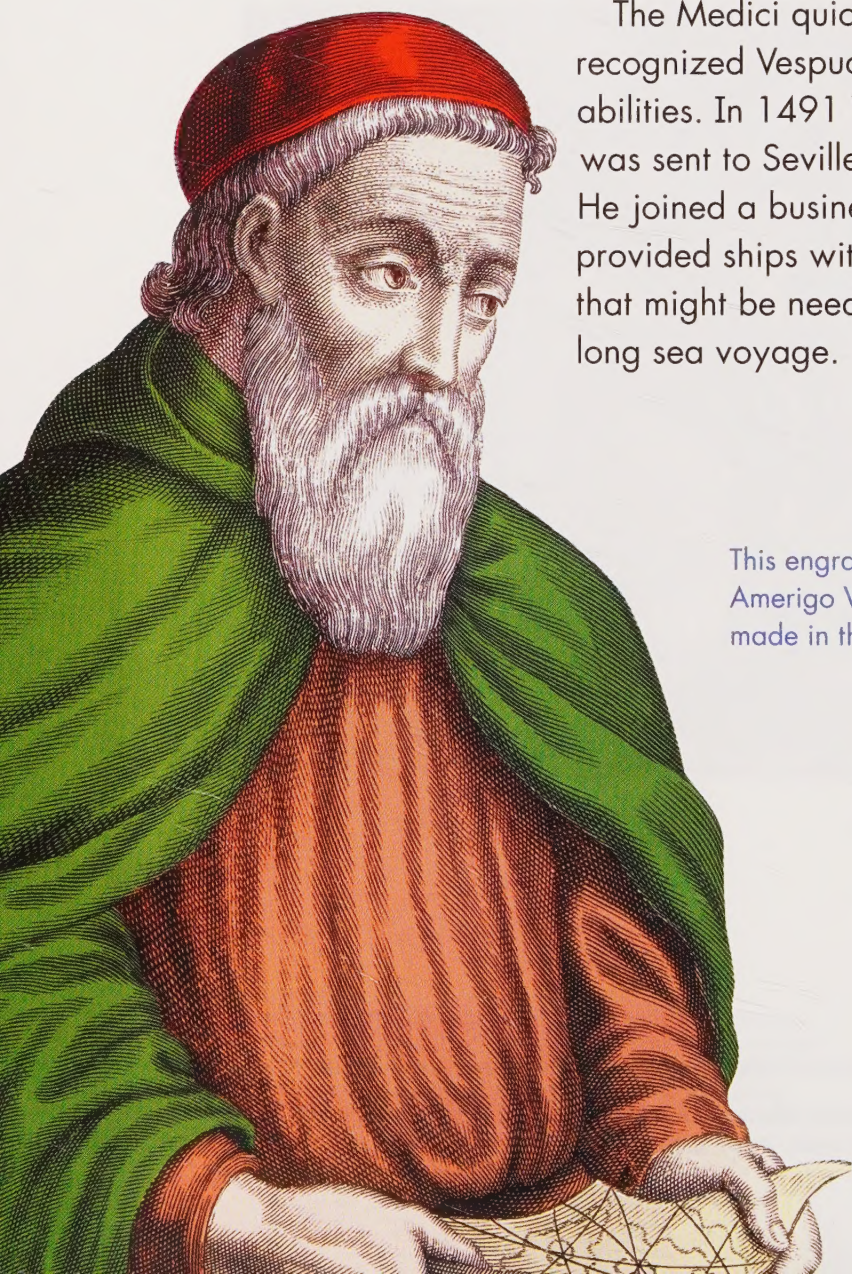
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Who was Amerigo Vespucci?

Amerigo Vespucci was born in Florence, Italy, on March 9, 1454. He came from a large and well-respected family. Young Vespucci studied subjects such as geography, math, and **astronomy**, or the scientific study of the stars and planets. He learned to read and write in Latin. After finishing school he went to work for the Medici (MEH-dih-chee) family.

The Medici quickly recognized Vespucci's abilities. In 1491 Vespucci was sent to Seville, Spain. He joined a business that provided ships with supplies that might be needed on a long sea voyage.

This engraving of Amerigo Vespucci was made in the 1800s.



Florence and the Renaissance

Vespucci lived during the Renaissance, a time of great achievements. Scientists made important discoveries. Artists painted pictures and made statues of marble and bronze for churches, government buildings, and private homes.

The Medici were among the most powerful citizens in the city, and they ruled Florence for nearly three hundred years. The head of the family during the mid- to late-1400s was known as Lorenzo the Magnificent, a merchant and a banker.

A Sense of Adventure

Spain was a great **maritime** power with ships that traveled from Spanish ports to cities in Europe and northern Africa. It was an exciting time that sparked Vespucci's sense of adventure.

Christopher Columbus made his first voyage across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492. Vespucci knew all about Columbus's voyages. Vespucci's company even stocked a ship for Columbus's second voyage, and the two men became friends.



Vespucci helped supply the ships Columbus (shown here) used on his second voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.

Vespucci's Voyages

Vespucci was determined to join in the search for a sea route to the Far East. He knew the supplies needed for such a long sea voyage. Because he had studied astronomy, he could plot a course by looking at the stars.

The First Voyage

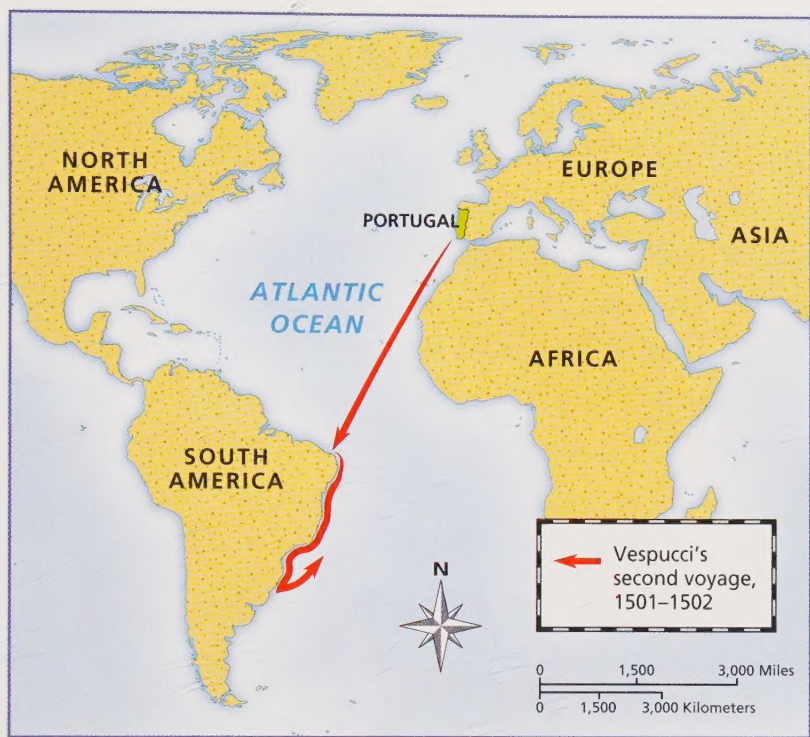
In May 1499 Vespucci got his wish. He was hired as the navigator for an **expedition** and **embarked** on his first voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. A navigator charts the course of a ship. When he reached the coast of what is now called South America, Vespucci continued south in search of now a route to Asia. He sailed beyond the mouth of the Amazon River before returning to Spain. Vespucci was back in Spain by June 1500.

Vespucci turned back because his ship was in poor condition. He was sure, however, that he had found the passage to Asia and he was ready to try again.

The European Discovery of America

Merchants brought spices and silk to Europe from India and China. Traveling to Asia by land, however, was difficult. Wars also made the trip even more dangerous.

Columbus thought he could reach the Far East by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. He persuaded King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to support his plan. In 1492 Columbus believed he landed on an island in Asia called the Indies. Therefore, he named the people there "Indians."



The Second Voyage

The Spanish government was not interested in Vespucci's plans. He turned, therefore, to another maritime power, Portugal. Vespucci embarked on his second voyage from the city of Lisbon in May 1501.

Vespucci probably traveled along the east coast of South America to the southern border of Brazil on this voyage. He may have gone as far as southern Argentina. Vespucci's route back to Portugal is not known, but his ship anchored in Lisbon in July 1502.

Vespucci's Last Years

At the end of his life, Vespucci was one of the most famous people in Europe. The letters he wrote describing his voyages were copied into several languages and printed in books.

In 1505 Vespucci became a Spanish citizen. The Spanish government gave him the job of *piloto mayor* or "master navigator." One of his duties was to prepare a map of the best routes for ships to travel in order to reach what he called the "New World." Vespucci died in Seville, Spain, in 1512.

Two Voyages or Four?

Did Vespucci embark on two voyages or four? The records are simply not clear.

The main source of information about his voyages are the letters Vespucci wrote to friends and government officials. In his later letters, Vespucci added details and changed some of the dates. Vespucci claims in some letters that he went to the Americas four times. But only two voyages can be proved.



This image shows a copy of the signature of Amerigo Vespucci, piloto mayor.

Following the Stars

Navigation is the science of guiding a boat safely from one place to another. A navigator must decide what direction to go, how far the ship has traveled, and where it is on the open sea.

Today there are instruments that show a ship's **latitude** and **longitude**. In Vespucci's day navigators studied astronomy and followed the stars. Clouds and storms could easily send sailors off course.

Latitude

Sailors knew whether they were in the northern or southern part of the ocean by the position of stars. By using an **astrolabe**, an instrument used to measure the height of the Sun during the day or a star at night, sailors could determine the ship's latitude. It was hard, however, to keep the astrolabe pointed at the Sun or a star because most of the time the ship was moving.

The astrolabe was invented by the ancient Greeks. It was first used in Europe in the early 1100s.



Longitude

It was harder to measure longitude than latitude. Ships often had to take a zigzag course as they sailed to make the best use of the wind. Changes in direction made it hard for sailors to determine how far they had traveled.

Dead reckoning was the most common way to measure longitude. In dead reckoning, the navigator followed changes in direction with a compass. He tracked how many hours the ship had been sailing and how fast it had been going. From this information, he made a guess about the distance east or west the ship had sailed.



Vespucci's Contributions

Vespucci the Navigator

Vespucci used what he knew about geography, math, and astronomy to navigate his voyages. He had hoped to explore Asia by sailing west.

But at that time, no one knew how far west explorers needed to sail in order to reach Asia. Columbus thought he had reached the Far East in 1492. Vespucci thought he had discovered a route to Asia during his first expedition. However, this was not true.

Columbus had failed to reach the Far East. So had Vespucci. Vespucci realized this during his second voyage. He compared the land he had reached with what was already known about Asia. It did not match.

Vespucci had reached a land that Europeans had never before explored. It was a "New World" to them. Many believe this to be Vespucci's greatest discovery.

Vespucci is known for other reasons too. He mapped thousands of miles of coastline that he explored. We know today that this land is the continent of South America.

What Vespucci Learned

Knowing the distance between Italy and South America showed Vespucci that he was still thousands of miles away from the Indies. He realized that Columbus was wrong. This land was not in Asia. It was a new land to the Europeans, a "New World."



Amerigo Vespucci was an Italian navigator who sailed for Spain and Portugal.



The New World

Vespucci's letters were full of interesting details about what he had seen. He wrote that the people he had seen were fast runners and excellent swimmers, and that their skin was almost red, "like a lion's mane." The people built huts from branches and palm leaves, and some of the houses were large enough to hold "six hundred souls."

The native people, Vespucci said, placed a high value on things like feathers or "birds' plumes of many colors." They made necklaces from fish bones and white or green stones. According to Vespucci, they did not care, however, about gold, jewels, and pearls.

Naming the New World

Amerigo Vespucci was not the first person from Europe to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. He did not bring back shiploads of gold and other things of value. The continents that he called the New World, however, are named for him.

The Brazilian Macaw is the largest parrot in the world. It can be found in the rain forests of South America.

Naming America

The **cartographer** Martin Waldseemüller (WALD-say-mule-er) suggested a name for the “New World” in 1507. A cartographer is a mapmaker.

Waldseemüller was working on a new and more current map of the world. For more than a thousand years, maps were largely copies of the one drawn by the ancient Greek cartographer Ptolemy (TALL-eh-mee) over a thousand years before. Waldseemüller wanted to make a new map that was more complete and up-to-date.

The map Waldseemüller drew was the first one to show the newly explored lands across the Atlantic Ocean. He also suggested that this land be named *Americus* or *America*.



Martin Waldseemüller's map was so large it had to be printed on twelve sheets of paper. At the top of the map are portraits of Ptolemy (left) and Vespucci (right). Ptolemy stands next to a picture of his map of the world. Vespucci stands next to a map showing the lands he helped explore. North America looks like a large island. South America is long and thin. The name *America*, which is printed on the southern continent, appears for the first time on Waldseemüller's map.



Glossary

astrolabe an instrument used by navigators to determine latitude

astronomy the scientific study of the stars, planets, and other bodies beyond Earth's atmosphere

cartographer a mapmaker

embark to set out on a venture

expedition a journey made for a special purpose

latitude the measurement of how far north or south of the equator a place is located

longitude the measurement of how far east or west of the prime meridian (0° longitude) a place is located

maritime having to do with the sea or sailing

Write to It!

Do you think the new continents should have been named after Amerigo Vespucci or Christopher Columbus? Write a paragraph to persuade people that America should have been named "Columbia" or that "America" is the best name for the continents.

Write your paragraph on a separate sheet of paper.

Maps

MapQuest, Inc.

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Fascinating Facts

- Amerigo Vespucci's cousin, Simonetta Vespucci, was known for her beauty. The famous painting by Sandro Botticelli called *The Birth of Venus*, painted about 1485, may be a portrait of her.
- The name *America* was originally just given to the southern continent. It was only years later that the northern continent came to be known as *North America*.
- In Latin, *Amerigo* is *Americus*. The male name *Americus* was changed to the female name *America* to match the female names of the other continents. The Latin names of the other continents are *Europa*, *Africa*, and *Asia*.

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Nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maps• Sidebars• Captions

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